



## Ear to Asia podcast

**Title:** How will Hong Kong march to China's new drum?

**Description:** Many citizens of Hong Kong fear the recently imposed National Security Law is only the latest move by Beijing to wind back civil liberties promised to last till 2047. But what does China's growing impatience mean for Hong Kongers? How will these changes affect business in the bustling metropolis? China watchers Dr Sow Keat Tok and Dr Kevin Carrico discuss the impact of this far reaching law with presenter Peter Clarke. An Asia Institute podcast.  
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**Voiceover:** The Ear to Asia podcast is made available on the Jakarta Post platform under agreement between the Jakarta Post and the University of Melbourne.

**Peter Clarke:** Hello, I'm Peter Clarke. This is Ear to Asia.

**Sow Keat Tok:** The issue at heart here is an existential threat to Hong Kong and to Hong Kong identity. You'll probably see a lot more silent resistance. You'll see greater disappointment in the way that Hong Kong's developing, and people leaving Hong Kong. You'll also see people accepting what is and just live on a day-to-day basis without thinking too much.

**Kevin Carrico:** The fact that people from Hong Kong, now rather than accepting refugees as the city once did, are now fleeing abroad as refugees really highlights the importance of maintaining an open and honest discussion about what's going on in Hong Kong and in the broader Sinophone world.

**Peter Clarke:** In this episode, how will Hong Kong march to Beijing's new drum?

Ear to Asia is the podcast from Asia Institute, the Asia research specialist at the University of Melbourne.

In mid this year, China's national government imposed a contentious and widely perceived as draconian national security law on Hong Kong. Citing the need to restore order after witnessing months of disruptive pro-democracy mass protests in 2019.

Many citizens of Hong Kong fear this law is only the latest move by Beijing to further wind back the civil liberties that were promised the last 50 years from its handover from Great Britain in 1997. But what is China's increasingly heavy hand in the governance of the former British colony renowned for its freewheeling capitalism and dynamic culture actually mean for Hong Kongers? How will these drastic changes affect business in one of the world's major financial centres? Joining me in our virtual studio to examine how Hong Kong got to this point, and its prospects into the future, our China analyst Dr. Kevin Carrico from Monash University, and Asia



political scientist, Dr. Sow Keat Tok from Asia Institute. Kevin, welcome to Ear to Asia. And welcome back, Sow Keat.

Kevin Carrico: Thank you.

Sow Keat Tok: Hi, Peter. Nice to meet you again.

Peter Clarke: Sow Keat and Kevin, as we know, at 11:00 PM on the 30th of June 2020, only a few months back, that's Hong Kong time the PRC imposed Hong Kong national security law came into effect in that special autonomous region. Sow Keat, let's just start nibbling away at exactly what this is all about. What as you see it are the purported objectives of this new law coming from Beijing?

Sow Keat Tok: Having this law passed on the 30th of June, it is a very clear signal it's targeted at Hong Kong and its recent unrest. Just to roll back a bit. I think, since 2019, we have this series of unrest in Hong Kong, and the movement towards really autonomy, greater democracy, and there were even talks about Hong Kong going independent. Still, obviously, this law is passed as a means to arrest this developing trend within Hong Kong and perhaps try to rein in the sentiments in Hong Kong that had been feeding into the international debates all this time.

Peter Clarke: There was an event back in March 2019, Sow Keat, that prefigured all this. That was the attempt by Carrie Lam and her advisors to introduce an extradition law. That was sort of the spark, wasn't it, that got most of those really intense democracy protests going?

Sow Keat Tok: Absolutely. So, the whole point didn't really start with this discussion about Hong Kong, and China really is about Hong Kong and Taiwan. It was because of this murder case, which the suspect was required in Taiwan, and Hong Kong doesn't really have an extradition treaty with Taiwan. And all this blew up because the way that the extradition conditions, arrangement is being phrased, it actually allows for suspects to be extradited to Mainland China. And that kind of caused a bit of concern in Hong Kong because of recent cases about abductions of publishers, book publishers, and Democrats in Hong Kong into Mainland China. And that gives rise to the fear that Mainland China could just easily target anyone in Hong Kong who they feel as someone that is threatening the regime, and use the legal means to trial them in Mainland China.

Peter Clarke: Well, ultimately, of course, as we saw as it unfolded, Carrie Lam and the government backed down and withdrew it bit by bit slowly, but didn't really satisfy the protesters. And Kevin, there was another wrinkle wasn't there? Of course, midst all this, the COVID pandemic. Do you perceive as we dig into the security law itself in just a few moments, do you perceive the COVID



pandemic and its suppression within the Hong Kong districts as part of the equation here?

Kevin Carrico: The pandemic has certainly, to a degree left the world distracted as governments around the world struggle to cope with the repeated outbreaks. All of us living in Melbourne know very much about that experience. Unfortunately, preventing the spread of Coronavirus can also provide a very ideal pretext that's difficult to argue with to suppress gatherings and protests of the type that really characterised almost daily if not weekly life in Hong Kong throughout 2019. Even before the national security law was passed and implemented in late June, we did see the banning of, for example, the Tiananmen massacre commemoration in Victoria Park that's really gone on for 30 years now being banned for the first time in history. The national security law is not so much a complete break with the direction in which things were moving. But really kind of in market escalation of Beijing's attempts to silence dissent in opposition in Hong Kong by any means including using social distancing and other excuses.

Peter Clarke: And Kevin, even though troops, perhaps massing on the border was a threat to Hong Kongers, it's been the police really, hasn't it? A real intensification of their tactics to crackdown on just citizens around railway stations, around universities, etc. So, as you see it, has there been a really marked intensification of the actual behaviour of Hong Kong Police?

Kevin Carrico: Yes, there has been. I was actually in Hong Kong, June 12th 2019, when the current round of protests broke out. And I was, I think, just as surprised as anyone by the police response to protests that day. Really, just over the top police brutality, tear gas, rubber bullets, really aiming to suppress the legally protected right to gather and to protest against government policy. Now, over the months that followed, tensions between the public and the police only intensified. And I saw throughout August, throughout September of last year, an almost ritualised situation, wherein people would gather outside of a police station shining laser lights into the station, shouting slogans, and essentially waiting for the police to come out of the station and chase protesters through the streets. And eventually would reach a point at which that would happen.

The police would use greatly excessive force relative to the gatherings that were happening outside of police stations. I myself have been hit in the arm and the face with a beanbag round despite just standing around observing. I think that the focus on whether or not China would send in troops to Hong Kong really overestimated the distinction between the PRC military and the Hong Kong Police, which are really increasingly becoming, how shall I say, sort of the military wing of the Hong Kong and thus by extension, the central Beijing government?



Peter Clarke: Sow Keat, let's examine more closely the actual law produced very quickly by the Beijing regime that covers four main areas, doesn't it? Subversion, secession, terrorism, and foreign interference. It's quite a long document. It's ambiguous. It's very general in some of its articles, and also the threatened penalties within this security law fail to weight the various crimes, so called. They use the word grave, for example, in grave cases, all very ambiguous and open ended. Just take us a bit further into that. The actual extent of this law, and how it's been framed.

Sow Keat Tok: What you say about ambiguous is definitely a trait of Chinese laws in general. But to put things in perspective, I think this is a national law. This is not a Hong Kong law or not one that is passed under the auspices of basic law of Hong Kong. This is a national law that's passed by the National People's Congress in Beijing. One interesting part of it is that while one hand within the basic law there is this article 23, which talks about Hong Kong government having to pass a security law to safeguard security. It was kind of shut down in 2003 during a massive protest on 1st of July.

Nothing has been said about passing the security law then. There has been attempts to reignite this security law. In particular, there was one attempt in the early 2010s. And even more recently, after the protests has erupted from 2019 onwards. However, this was one that eventually was passed down by the National People's Congress, and they use article 18 of the basic law as means to apply a national law into the territory. Now, one thing to note is that China has been trying to play by illegal means. You can say that it's been forced to down the throat of Hong Kongers. But nonetheless, it was done to a legal channel, which the basic law and the constitution, the Chinese Constitution allows. So, without commenting further on whether or not this is congruent to the spirit of law is definitely legal.

Peter Clarke: There's one article, article 38 in this national security law, which maybe it's overreach, but it wants to impose this law around the world, perhaps to intimidate the Chinese diaspora in other countries like Australia, like the United States. So, it imposes these laws virtually on everybody around the world.

Sow Keat Tok: Yes, 38 is indeed the most concerning one. And that's agreed amongst analysts across the world. Because the way that it is written applies to every single individual across the globe. It's not just the Chinese or overseas Chinese or Hong Kongers diaspora. The way that it was written, it says that anyone whether or not they are Hong Kong residents who engage in the four activities that we mentioned earlier on subversion, secession, terrorism, and foreign interference. They could be charged under the national security law. And that puts a sword over everyone's head. And anyone who's involved in not just Hong Kong politics, but Chinese politics as well. That involves anyone from journalists, to academics, to foreign politicians, and foreign commentaries as well. Whoever has been seen or interpreted as guilty of any of this charges could be trialled by the Chinese



law. That is not just when you get into Mainland China, but the point of time when you step into Hong Kong, you could potentially be apprehended and charged against those laws. So, it's really a big concern for me.

Peter Clarke: Sow Keat and Kevin, could reflect for a moment, and I know how opaque the PRC decision making processes are, and exactly how the complex dynamics work within the system of governance in the Mainland China, particularly with the Chinese Communist Party. But ultimately, you've mentioned, of course, all the protests, Sow Keat, what prompted the Chinese government to do this?

Sow Keat Tok: Let me put it this way, my starting point is to empathise with what's going on in Hong Kong, and the people of Hong Kong, the kind of environment that they're put in. But on the other hand, I also saw the need for China to make the retrocession of sovereignty back to Mainland China, something that is more wholesome from their own perspective. Despite the return of Hong Kong to Mainland China since 1997, the integration of the territory into Mainland China has been a big concern for Beijing. And the trajectory of Hong Kong identity, in particular, has been a focus of great debate within the Hong Kong policy circles in Mainland China.

I have close relationship with some of these Hong Kong watchers in Mainland China. And for many are times the discussion raised was that why is Hong Kong not becoming more China? So, the background of this really is that under Xi Jinping, Beijing is really, really fed up about the distraction Hong Kong has been giving to Beijing. Policy wise it has become a liability to Beijing, to a lot of extent, very much like what's going on with Taiwan. In order to keep this thing under control. And to make that as a less of an issue, policy issue area. I think that's the means that they try to suppress what is going on in Hong Kong.

It didn't help when the debate within Hong Kong has transgressed into a whole idea about Hong Kong becoming independent. That was the very, very last thing that Beijing wants, a secession. Beijing is already dealing with not just Taiwan issue, but also there is Hong Kong as an externality impact on Macau. What is going on in Hong Kong will have a big impact on the negotiation on Tibet, and how they deal with things in Xinjiang. This is not something that is an isolated one, and something that Beijing can wish away. That being said, I was surprised about the way that it has been passed, and he has been bulldozed through the National People's Congress. From the beginning of talks about passing this law to the implementation you're looking at less than half a year. And that is really quite unprecedented in terms of Hong Kong policy at least from 1997 onwards.

Peter Clarke: Kevin, you could highly describe what happened as evolutionary as Sow Keat was just implying in a way. But of course, what's happened is what we've been talking about is very congruent isn't with the long history of the Chinese Communist Party as a Marxist Leninist Party, and that hatred of



dissent of any kind. As someone who's very familiar with Hong Kong, do you perceive what's happened not only all those things that Sow Keat was just describing, but also is a form of national embarrassment for the Xi Jinping regime? That seeing Hong Kong the streets full of protesters, and unable to impose some sort of control on what is a big financial centre and also a tourist town. That was also a lot of face for the Xi Jinping Chinese Communist Party regime.

Kevin Carrico:

The national security law is ostensibly about the protests of 2019 or the rise of independence thinking in Hong Kong. But the way that I look at it is that it's really the combination of Beijing's desire to exercise greater control over Hong Kong. Now, there's a problem insofar as Beijing promised Hong Kong 50 years of genuine autonomy. Unfortunately, this fits into a longer, much larger pattern of Beijing promising autonomy to various occupied nations such as Tibet, or Xinjiang. And then very much failing to abide by those promises of autonomy.

In 2014, there was an article in a Hong Kong University undergraduate journal, which compared the promises of the basic law to the promises that the Chinese Communist Party had made in an agreement with the Tibetan government in the early 1950s. And found really a high degree of similarity in those promises of autonomy, lack of interference, freedom of belief, freedom of speech. And the question that was posed at that time, 2014 was whether Hong Kong's fate would at the end of the day be the same as Tibet's.

As someone who has done research on Tibet, I found the comparison at the time a bit melodramatic. Certainly, in 2014, Hong Kong was having a debate on universal suffrage, while people in Tibet were literally self immolating as a means of protest against escalating oppression. However, moving forward six years to 2020, we can see hints of this fundamental reality that was first highlighted in this article insofar as premises of autonomy sound nice, and people tend to believe them. But they never, in fact, manifest in reality.

The past 20 years of Hong Kong China relations have really been characterised by escalating tensions between Hong Kong's dynamic and relatively free political and media cultures and Beijing's desire for control. This started with the 2002 article 23 national security law controversy, and really reached its conclusion, I think, in the national security law this year. So, there's I think, many ways to understand Beijing's perspective, and its motivations. But I think we can't lose sight of the fact that Beijing and Hong Kong have vastly different political cultures. The tensions between those two cultures have been playing out and escalating over the past 20 years. And this national security law is really an effort to force Beijing's vision of national security, which is really regime security characterised foremost by insecurity into Hong Kong's political culture wherein it's fundamentally incompatible.



Peter Clarke: You mentioned that in compatibility. But of course, what Beijing has now done is moved some real party heavyweights into the apparatus within Hong Kong itself, on the ground in Hong Kong. So, as you see it, what do we have now? The Carrie Lam government is that sort of a Potemkin government now with the non Hong Kongers from Beijing with quite a history of repression themselves moved into positions of real everyday power in Hong Kong?

Kevin Carrico: Well, yes, I mean, since the early part of this century people have been talking about the idea that Hong Kong is actually ruled from the liaison office, which is the Beijing representative office in Hong Kong. According to the basic law, there was supposed to be political reform allowing for the direct election of the city's chief executive, and its legislature via universal suffrage. But that reform was at first continually delayed, and is now essentially stalled or frozen in time. So, although the people who represent Hong Kong are supposed to be elected by the people of Hong Kong, certainly the chief executive is appointed by Beijing, and many members of the Legislative Council continue to be appointed by Beijing friendly constituencies. So, these political figures who are ostensibly supposed to represent Hong Kong, in relations with Beijing very much end up really representing Beijing in relations with Hong Kong. And that is, unfortunately, an untenable situation for a politically mature society.

Sow Keat Tok: At least during the early days of handover, right up to about 2003 there has been real effort by Beijing to steer clear of meddling in Hong Kong affairs in a way that you look at the way that the right of abort issue back in 1999 was passed. And the intervention in the Asian financial crisis. You see Beijing really trying to just jump in and do something and then hit off straightaway and turn and leave everything behind it. That was until at least 2003. But gradually, I think the developments within Hong Kong because of the rapid changes in Hong Kong, Beijing felt that this is not enough anymore. It's not adequate anymore. The activism that arise out from Hong Kong, especially from the 2010s onwards regarding history reforms, regarding the occupy central movements as really making Beijing really, really nervous about losing control. And that ties in with what Kevin said about Beijing wanting to be in control.

If Beijing has that perception that it was comfortably in control of Hong Kong affairs, there wouldn't be such an overt attempt to pressure Hong Kong or to rein in Hong Kong in passing a law such as the national security law. But precisely because Beijing was fearful that Hong Kong might go off a different trajectory altogether, whether it's because of a different political culture. Whether it's because of a different political identity, or even simple social identity. If you look at things, effectively, Hong Kong prior to 1997, Hong Kong was separated from China for 150 years during the times after the Opium War. And under the colonial government, they have acquired a very different identity. And that came to a shock in 1997 when everything comes back together. China was thinking at that time that Hong Kong can just





return smoothly. There's always this loyalty towards the motherland, at least within the Hong Kong population. But they were very, very shocked when they saw that the identity differences really amounted to confrontation between what is going on in China, and the way that Hong Kongers are embracing a more globalised outlook.

Peter Clarke:

You're listening to Ear to Asia from Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne. And just a reminder to listeners about Asia Institute's recently launched online publication on Asia, and its society's politics, and cultures. It's called the Melbourne Asia Review. It's free to read and it's open access at [melbourneasiareview.edu.au](http://melbourneasiareview.edu.au). You'll find articles by some of our regular Ear to Asia guests, and by many others. Plus, you can catch recent episodes of Ear to Asia at the Melbourne Asia Review website, which again, you can find at [melbourneasiareview.edu.au](http://melbourneasiareview.edu.au).

I'm Peter Clarke with guest Dr. Kevin Carrico, and Dr. Sow Keat Tok, and we're discussing what China's heavy hand means for Hong Kong. Kevin, so many of the protesters we've seen on our television screens have been very young high school students, university students, albeit with some older Hong Kongers supporting them in the streets. We've seen those images as well. So the education system there over the years has had a mismatch with what's being taught in the People's Republic of China itself different expectations have been aroused in young Hong Kongers. How is Beijing going to manage that mismatch?

Kevin Carrico:

We have certainly seen just over the past six years since Occupy Central a really proactive assault on Hong Kong's very distinct academic culture. This one was primarily because in 2014, academics played a really key role in developing the idea of Occupy Central, and promoting this idea. In the years since there's been an increasing desire to exercise control over educational institutions. We've seen the removal of politically engaged and controversial professors at universities. We've seen the promotion of Beijing friendly loyalists into positions of administrative power, such as at Hong Kong University. And we've seen an attempt both by the government and by some figures within Hong Kong academia to argue that freedom of speech and academic freedom has particular red lines that cannot be crossed. And these red lines usually refer to discussion of the idea of independence.

Now, from my own perspective, academic freedom, and freedom of speech are not epitomised by taking advice from the government about what one can or cannot discuss. But that is kind of the reality in which people find themselves operating today, a desire for enhanced control. Now, that's not to say that there are not a lot of great people doing wonderful educational, and research work in Hong Kong. There really are. Hong Kong universities are outstanding places that still have a degree of freedom that one cannot find elsewhere in China. But the political pressures on academia, and the national security law passed in June really only make it increasingly difficult





to maintain that excellence and openness. It's thus really not in the service of the development of Hong Kong academia.

Peter Clarke: Sow Keat, I'd like to hear your thoughts on this, particularly the reported pressures we've heard about already on teachers within Hong Kong high schools, and particularly putting a focus on the history curriculum. And that mismatch I referred to with Kevin a moment ago, what are your thoughts on that?

Sow Keat Tok: Currently, the debate in Hong Kong is one that is more on whether or not to adopt more content on Mainland Chinese history, or Chinese civilization or history, if you want to put it in that way, or a more nativist version of Hong Kong history. At least prior to the passing of the law, the debate was ongoing quite furiously. This is a reminder of what has been going on in Taiwan during the mid 1990s right up to the mid '00s. Part of it is that there's a greater urge for Beijing to reform history curriculum in Hong Kong to reflect that has been taught in Mainland China. And that was the spark of the youth movement towards the national education and history curriculum in the very first place.

The confronting view was that Hong Kong has its own version of history. There should be more to talk about it. In fact, Hong Kong identity stretched back to the 1960s during the riot times, that has been consolidating, and crystallising since then, and things like that. So, this two camps has been at loggerheads with each other, and were trying to fight up, which has the upper hand in writing the educational curriculum. And with the passing of this law, it seems that the verdict is passed. Now, China is not willing to get into this, especially because Xi Jinping, since he came to power has been emphasising a lot about having a greater sense of historical unity. He keeps emphasising that history is the best textbook. That seems to fit into the greater debate here that Beijing is going to put their feet down and say, "This is how we're going to do it. That everyone's going to learn Mainland Chinese history." The space for negotiating a different version of history is definitely getting a lot smaller in Hong Kong, if there is any at all today.

The second thing I'd like to raise is something that relates to what Kevin has mentioned about academic freedom. I'd like to also highlight that academic freedom, the sense of academic freedom is not just felt in Hong Kong, but I think it can be felt worldwide within the Chinese research circle. After the passing of this law, there is this concern if, as I mentioned earlier, because of the way that the law has been written, it kind of extends to quite a big group of people, if not the entire world, whoever is against China or say bad things about China. It puts us in a very precarious position.

Just to relate that in a more anecdotal way. Prior, to this podcast, we were talking about the kind of topics that we could cover. And when Hong Kong came up we were hesitating if it's a good topic to talk about because of the concern over national security law. Now, being physically in Australia, in



Melbourne, and yet we are thinking of whether or not to talk about Hong Kong just says a lot about the red line that Kevin is talking about. And that red line is not just in Hong Kong. It's actually everywhere. I don't know if Kevin agrees with me. I felt that increasingly that red line is governed not just by Mainland Chinese government, but also by the anti-Chinese sentiments that is probably going around in United States, in some parts of this country, or in Europe.

Kevin Carrico:

I very much agree that this law is an attempt to universalize this arbitrary red line. I have been travelling to, and spending time in Hong Kong for 18 years now. I spent a considerable part of 2019 in Hong Kong conducting research there on political culture. And as someone who has not always had the best relationship with the Chinese central government, I viewed Hong Kong as a safe space where I could do research. Unfortunately, that's no longer true. I no longer have any plans to visit Hong Kong. Not only as a result of Coronavirus, obviously, but as a result of the political environment there. What is, I think, really tragic is that so many people that I know who have lived their entire lives in Hong Kong are now left with no choice, but to flee abroad, moving to the United Kingdom, moving to Taiwan, and moving to Australia.

So, I think that in a sense, the law is an attempt to universalise these arbitrary red lines. But the fact that people from Hong Kong now rather than accepting refugees as the city once did are now fleeing abroad as refugees really highlights the importance of not yielding to these types of red lines, and maintaining an open and honest discussion about what's going on in Hong Kong, and in the broader Sinophone world.

Peter Clarke:

Sow Keat, we can assume I think fairly that during its decision making process to have this crackdown and to draft and impose the national security law on Hong Kong, the PRC CCP regime in Beijing would have thought about the reaction of the rest of the world. How do you appraise the reaction from the rest of the world? The United States, for example, Australia is another very clear example. Australia has certainly aroused the ire of the regime in Beijing, and across Europe too we're seeing all sorts of reactions to what's going on from Beijing. How do you appraise in real terms what the reaction has been globally to the imposition of the law on Hong Kong?

Sow Keat Tok:

The concern is that through the extradition law between Hong Kong and United States or Hong Kong and Australia, China will be able to extradite "political criminals" back to Mainland China to stand trial. It's a long stretch, but I think this concern is merited. Whether or not China will be applying the national security law as means to apprehend political opponents from overseas and extradite them back to China, I think remains to be seen. The concern over the developments in Hong Kong, and the urge to put things down in Hong Kong supersede the concerns over how the international community is going to react. I think we are seeing a trend within Chinese



foreign policy, the so called wolf warrior foreign policy that China has been taking on since last year. This is very much a continuation. What is there to lose for them? They have already been seen as the rogue of foreign policy already. So, to this end, I think it's more out of the concern about domestic politics than really about how others are going to perceive China.

Peter Clarke: Well, certainly US Secretary of State, Pompeo, has made some bellowing noises, but really in practical terms the United States hasn't done that much more has it around the Hong Kong issue? Certainly, in terms of the status of the Hong Kong dollar, which brings us to business in Hong Kong. How are we perceiving what's happening to the confidence of business within the Hong Kong financial centre?

Sow Keat Tok: There are precedents about how a vibrant business environment can still continue to persist even in a more dictatorial or authoritarian environment. You can see many cities in China as examples. You can see Singapore as an example too where political freedom is not exactly the top item when it comes to business transactions. But it does give a little bit of apprehension as in like how free business dealings can be carried out. I think the apprehension can be more than elevated through clear legal means, the show of rule of law. At least in the business realm, the rule of law still very much applies in Hong Kong.

I think there would be some form of concerns. And in particular, those industries, which has further outreach like analysts industries, the journalist industry, presses, even media will be concerned about establishing bases in Hong Kong, or even consider pulling out of Hong Kong. But if you're looking at financial services, legal services, or logistics, manufacturing, the national security law is not going to affect them too much.

Peter Clarke: Kevin, can we just touch on a cultural dimension of all this before we finish our conversation soon. And that's the issue of language. We've seen a long history around the world right through history really, of language becoming a point of tension, and a point of control when one power is overtaking another power. The imposition of a particular national language or the language of power. And we're seeing that in Hong Kong too, aren't we? With Cantonese giving way to Putonghua or Mandarin, as it's generally known. Could you reflect on that for a moment?

Kevin Carrico: Yeah. Well, there's the old saying that a dialect is a language without an army. The line between a language and a dialect is often very difficult to define, if not arbitrary. Cantonese, as sort of the local language of Hong Kong very much functions as a representative of local culture. And that is a distinct culture, which since at least 2002 has been very much under unprecedented pressure and threat.

Within this context, we can see certain developments such as using Mandarin, as a medium for teaching Chinese language in Hong Kong schools,



which otherwise would be perhaps unremarkable can take on a more ominous appearance insofar as the use of Mandarin while facilitating interactions with China as a whole. And thereby facilitating economic exchange and cultural exchange. And thus being beneficial, can also only be read within the context of a city of seven million people who feel that their culture and their way of life is not only being absorbed, but to a degree erased by influence from Beijing. So, when viewed within the context of expanding CCP control and change of culture, even something unremarkable as people in Hong Kong learning more Mandarin can become a source of genuine anxiety.

Peter Clarke: Sow Keat, what's your view on the use of Mandarin and Cantonese, and that issue of identity for Hong Kongers?

Sow Keat Tok: There is increasing pressure on Hong Kong to adopt more Mandarin, but that is not just political pressure. I think that was also the issue of practicality. Increasingly, there are a lot more Mainland Chinese moving into Hong Kong, whether as tourists or to live within Hong Kong. I have this very interesting experience of being in Hong Kong immediately after the handover in 1997. My relationship with Hong Kong stretched all the way back to the early 1990s. But I remember very, very well, this time when I was in Hong Kong in 1997, after the handover. I've got a friend hosting me in Hong Kong, and before even we go out to the shops or to the streets, I remember very very vividly that he reminded me always, always speak Cantonese. Do not speak Mandarin.

That left me very curious, as in why should I do that? I'm very fluent in Mandarin. Being born a Singaporean, I have no problem with conversing in Mandarin, but why do I need to force myself to speak Cantonese rather than to speak Mandarin? He just said, "Because you don't want to be seen as a Mainlander. That's it." Okay. There is a lot of prejudice against Mainlanders. And the prejudice remains very, very infused in the Hong Kong identity. Even though all these years that Hong Kong has been returned to China. Part of that debate about using Cantonese, and using Mandarin is very much an extension of that identity conflict, rather than something that is purely linguistic.

So, there's a practical side of it where increasingly if you see the shops in Hong Kong, the salespeople will have to try to learn Mandarin. At the same time there was this resistance within the society that they don't want to be like Mainland China. Unfortunately, when it comes to politics, it's very easily weaponized. They become a battleground for identity, and for mobilisation of political support.

Peter Clarke: Sow Keat, we started our conversation together, and we come to the end of it, sadly. There's so much to talk about, isn't there? We started with the civil liberties of Hong Kongers, and just how encroached upon those civil liberties are in everyday life in Hong Kong. It seems that the one country two systems



is well and truly over. Serious intimidation of people's freedom of speech in Hong Kong, etc., by the national security law seems pretty much complete. But what does the future hold in your view? As you analyse all that, and appraise what you know, where is Hong Kong headed over the next say, year to two years?

Sow Keat Tok: The issue at heart here is an existential threat to Hong Kong, and to Hong Kong identity. This existential threat is not going to die down unless people are going to give up on Hong Kong altogether. What is going on in Hong Kong will subside, but I am not optimistic about the direction in which Hong Kong is heading. You'll probably see a lot more silent resistance. You'll see greater disappointment in the way that Hong Kong is developing and people leaving Hong Kong. You'll also see a mixed bag of people accepting what it is, and what is going to be, and just live on a day to day basis without thinking too much. But whatever it is, the old Hong Kong that we knew is that what replaces it is a new Hong Kong that is going to be like mainland China increasingly.

Peter Clarke: And of course, we will watch all those developments with great interest here. And it is consequential isn't it? This plays into that much larger narrative of China, the rise of China, the decline of the United States, Taiwan, and also the South China Sea. So, Hong Kong represents something really important in terms of geopolitics. Kevin, Sow Keat, thank you so much for spending your time with us. And your inputs today here on Ear to Asia.

Sow Keat Tok: Thank you for having us around. Thank you.

Kevin Carrico: Thank you very much.

Peter Clarke: Our guests this time have been Dr. Sow Keat Tok from Asia Institute, and Dr. Kevin Carrico from Monash University. Ear to Asia is brought to you by Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne, Australia. You can find more information about this, and all our other episodes at the Asia Institute website. Be sure to keep up with every episode of Ear to Asia by following us on the Apple Podcast app, Stitcher, Spotify, or SoundCloud. If you like the show, please rate and review it on Apple Podcasts. Every positive review helps new listeners find this show. And of course, let your friends know about us on social media. This episode was recorded on the 9th of October 2020. Producers were Kelvin Param and Eric van Bommel of profactual.com. Ear to Asia is licenced under Creative Commons Copyright 2020, the University of Melbourne. I'm Peter Clarke, thanks for your company.